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What's the story, allegory?

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ABSTRACT

If ever a literary genre were made for consumer research, that literary genre is allegory. The word comes from the Ancient Greek *allegoreo*, meaning to speak of the other in the marketplace. Building on the pioneering research of Barbara B. Stern, this article considers the character and characteristics of allegorical storytelling. It does so by means of an empirical study of a richly storied apparel brand, Hollister (HCo), whose sudden rise and rapid fall contains allegorical lessons for retailers and researchers alike. Part of a project to promote literary criticism, it identifies three key themes that typify allegories – *Life*, *Location* and *Language* – all of which figure prominently in a sizeable introspective study of HCo consumers.

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> The marketplace is the happy hunting ground of the storyteller. Latham (2020, 74)

Once upon a time, the words "Welcome to the Pier" were on everyone's lips. Everyone who was anyone, that is. Uttered by gorgeous, semi-naked greeters at retail store entrances worldwide, they articulated the allure of an iconic apparel brand and bedazzled a generation of fashion-conscious teenagers (Sanes 2012; Shah 2016). Although Hollister's ersatz heritage of sun-kissed surfer Dudes and beach-bound Bettys was the antithesis of authenticity, innumerable young people embraced the brand's So-Cal spiel and bore its seabird-in-flight logo as a badge of belonging (Craik 2011; Schlossberg 2015).

Twenty years later, belonging has been abandoned. Hollister (aka HCo) is not so much an iconic brand as an ironic brand. It is a laughing stock for some, an evergreen memory for others and, for the academically inclined, a meaningful morality tale of the marketplace (Bhasin and Rupp 2017). Akin to Icarus of Ancient Greek legend, HCo flew high for a while then fell precipitously from grace (Fry 2019). The classical combination of hubris and nemesis clipped its wings, melted its consumer-captivating allure and plunged the benighted brand into an ocean of red ink (Forbes 2019).

Raising Hollister, however, remains a worthwhile pursuit, if only because it offers insights into the nature, character and afterlife of a storied retail brand. We seek to do so with the aid of literary theory in general and the allegory-inspired insights of Barbara B. Stern (1988) in particular. Thirty years ago, her studies of allegories in contemporary advertising concluded with a call for further research on consumer responses to allegorical aspects of commercial life (Stern 1990). This paper responds to, and provides a contemporary (albeit pre-pandemic) take on, the late great scholar's entreaty. We start with a few words on the rise of storytelling and the standing of literary criticism …

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Stories, stories, everywhere

Stories, Salman Rushdie (1990) says, are the sea of life. Stories, Patrick Rothfuss (2007, 304) declares, "give us the clarity our real lives lack." Stories, Tim Parks (2020, 15–16) observes in his search for the wellsprings of consciousness, "are more familiar to us than living itself." Stories, certainly, are more than familiar to many marketing and consumer researchers. Whether it be management bestsellers about storytelling (e.g. Denning 2004; Godin 2005, 2012; Miller 2017; Smith 2012), scholarly analyses of consumer narratives (Cayla and Arnould 2013; Fournier 1998; Friend and Thompson 2003; Levy 1985; O'Donohoe 2001; Ritson and Elliott 1999), or latter-day endeavours to present research findings in fictionalised form (Cochoy 2020; Hyde 2020; Schouten 2019), the story of storytelling in consumer research is nothing if not captivating.

Although narrative-driven contributions to consumption, markets and culture are in the ascendant, the same cannot be said for literary criticism. True, lit-crit-led contributions continue to appear on occasion (e.g. Brown 2020; Hackley and Hackley 2019; Lanier and Rader 2019). And mythography has been a major component of CCT from the outset (Arnould and Thompson 2005). But if Arnould and Thompson's (2018) recent anthology is any indication, the focus of our field is shifting toward a new array of conceptual imperatives – assemblages, actor-networks, practice theory, etc. (Canniford and Badje 2015) – as well as macro-scale, context-conscious studies that "investigate markets as complex social systems" (de Kervenoael, Badje, and Schwob 2018, 418).

The research recounted herein seeks to show that the canons of literary criticism remain vital and relevant. Part of a series of studies of a story-suffused retail brand, the paper is inspired by Frederick Crews' (1979, 2001) ingenious analyses of Winnie-the-Pooh from a variety of lit-crit perspectives, as well as CCT's tradition of serial studies in singular settings, such as Burning Man (Kozinets 2002) and American Girl (Diamond et al. 2009). By doing so, we not only aim to build on Barbara Stern's (1988, 1990) inspirational articles on allegory, but also respond to Kevin Keller's (2020) recent call for more literary approaches to branding understanding.

Glory, glory allegory

Allegory may be one of the most ancient literary genres, yet it always has something to say (Tambling 2010). A recent example of its continuing utility is J.K. Rowling's (2020) bestselling book, *The Ickabog*. Published in instalments during lockdown, it tells a cautionary tale of Cornucopia. Once a happy land of plenty, Cornucopia was a place of sated consumers, where "everybody had lots of food, the merchants made pots of gold" and good King Fred took of everything (Rowling 2020, 13). But this sybaritic idyll is destroyed when a fearsome fabled monster comes to life. Stories of the brutal, unstoppable, allegedly cannibalistic Ickabog spread fear far and wide, as well as profiteering, malfeasance and tyranny. The fabric of society falls apart. A little girl and boy, however, see through the rumour to the reality of the Ickabog and, with its assistance, turn the tables on Cornucopia's tyrannical malefactors. The avaricious ruling caste is punished, peace and prosperity return …

The Ickabog may or may not be an allegory of contemporary consumer society, but it can be interpreted that way. A venerable literary genre that is alternately loathed and lauded, allegory has fallen in and out of fashion and, as Madsen (1996) vociferously insists, tends to re-emerge at times of societal stress, political duress, cultural crisis and economic tumult. It is a narrative mode where the story operates on two levels simultaneously (Hirsch 2014). Orwell's *Animal Farm*, for instance, is a simple "beast fable" where some creatures end up "more equal than others." But, in an era when an Iron Curtain descended across Europe, two ideologically opposed power blocks arose and a thermo-nuclear war appeared imminent, *Animal Farm* functioned as a condemnation of Soviet-style Communism. Whether it be *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels* or *Heart of Darkness*, an allegory "signifies something different from what it depicts" (Sutherland 2010, 88).

More than that, it is a mode of interpretation where stories such as, say, "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Emperor's New Clothes" or *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* are presumed to possess deeper meanings, higher aims, wider implications. Exemplified by the Biblical parable, the fables of Aesop and the classical legends that contain "lessons" for contemporary readers – the fall of Icarus, for instance (Godin 2012) – an allegory is an extended metaphor of sorts, an analogy in narrative form, a story that means more than it says. As attested by the bestselling success of *Squirrel Inc.* (Denning 2004), *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Johnson 1998) or *Winnie-the-Pooh on Management* (Allen 2011), it is an approach that is perennially popular with businesspeople.

According to Northrop Frye (1957), the foremost literary critic of the pre-poststructuralist epoch, every act of literary interpretation is an allegory (de Man 1979). Such acts assume that there are different meanings, divergent meanings, diametrically opposed meanings beneath the surface of the focal text, or any text for that matter. It's an assumption that's integral to interpretive consumer research in general and CCT in particular, where searching for deep meanings in masses of empirical data is the learned scholar's lot (Levy 1996). Indeed, the pioneer of literary approaches to consumer behaviour, Barbara B. Stern, made her name through allegory. Her first article in JM examined medieval allegories of the *Piers Ploughman*, *Divine Comedy* type and applied their principles to late-twentieth-century advertising (Stern 1988). This was followed by an article on the genre's classical antecedents, which concluded with a call for further allegorical analyses of consumer society (Stern 1990).

Relatively few scholars have responded to Stern's exhortation. Several noteworthy allegories have of course been written by consumer researchers, including Belk (1987), Holbrook (1997), Maclaran (2003), Schau (2006) and Schouten (2014). And, if Frye's contention concerning the ubiquity of allegorical interpretation is conceded, then its presence pervades our academic domain.[1] All things considered, though, Stern's allegory-led literary approach, if not completely ignored, remains frustratingly unfulfilled. Researchers' reluctance may be due to lit-crit's loss of academic altitude since the glory days of deconstruction (Eagleton 2004; Jameson 2019; Moretti 2013). Or it could be a consequence of the confusing double meaning of "allegory," insofar as it is both a literary genre (a la *Lord of the Flies*) and an interpretive tool (the technical term is "allegoresis"). But regardless of the reasons, it is a genre that makes its mark in storm-tossed times, times when societal fluidity turns turbulent (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), times when dystopianism looms large (Bradshaw, Fitchett, and Hietanen 2020), as *The Ickabog* bears brilliant witness.

Consider Hollister

Not unlike Icarus, Hollister is a teenage apparel brand that soared high for the first 15 years of the millennium and whose gliding seagull logo adorned the T-shirted torsos of young people worldwide (Craik 2011). Mirroring the myth, it flew too high, fell from grace and spiralled into a sea of troubles, where it metamorphosed into something more mainstream (Bhasin and Rupp 2017). Although it remains in the land of the living, it does so as a shattered icon, a broken-backed brand, a pale shadow of its former self.[2]

It wasn't always thus. On the contrary, HCo was the pride and joy of the Dedalus of retail store design, Mike Jeffries. As chief executive of Abercrombie & Fitch, he spawned and fertilised an A&F offshoot, which was targeted at an adolescent demographic and debuted as the new millennium

[1]There are many variations on the allegorical approach: articles expressly written as allegories (Belk's "Modest Proposal"); articles that employ extant stories for allegorical purposes (Holbrook's hijack of Dr Seuss); "proper" articles that are allegorical in parts (Bode and Østergäard's "Wacky Worlds"); articles that erroneously use "allegory" as synonym for "story" (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003) and articles which allude to allegory in passing (e.g. Arnould and Thompson 2005; Askegäard 2010; Giesler 2008; Minowa and Belk 2017; Thompson 2004).

[2]The "close reading" method was developed by the so-called New Critics, whose analytical approach dominated literary scholarship for the best part of the twentieth century (Eagleton 1996). I.A. Richards, its progenitor, made his name with introspective studies of students' responses to (anonymised) works of poetry. He was inspired, interestingly, by advances in advertising research during the Roaring Twenties.

dawned. With its nocturnal interiors, overpowering atmospherics, shabby beach-shack frontage and fashion model-calibre sales associates – who not only looked like Greek gods but welcomed eager consumers while wearing next to nothing – Hollister took off like Icarus on amphetamines (Moon 2010).

On top of that, Jeffries invented an origin myth for his brand-new brand. Presumably indebted to the then popular J Peterman catalogue (Birkerts 2000), a mail order operation that wrapped its outdoor outfits in ripping yarns of derring-do, this comprised the adventurous tale of one "John Hollister," who abandoned an affluent Gilded Age lifestyle to see the world and seek Shangri-La. He finally found what he was looking for on the sun-drenched beaches of Southern California, where John sold surfboards, swimwear and associated sundries from a flyblown beach hut. Founded in 1922, the family firm slowly grew, step-by-step, into a So-Cal lifestyle-selling behemoth, beloved by consumers – dubbed "Dudes" and "Bettys" – from Seattle to Sydney.

HCo's story may have been cut from the whole cloth, yet it was worn with pride and pleasure by many young people. They not only bought into the brand's sex-soaked, sun-sea-sand-surf suggestiveness, but their parents or guardians were baffled by a retail operation where it was impossible to see the wares, where the in-store experience was excruciating, where premium prices were charged for nondescript outfits emblazoned with an over-sized seagull soaring above the word Hollister in huge capital letters, and whose posters and packaging material featured images that weren't far short of soft porn (Moon 2010). Widespread parental ire, of course, further added to HCo's attraction. Sales took off. Hubris took hold (Sanes 2012).

Nemesis knocked on Hollister's door in the wake of the Great Recession (Schlossberg 2015). The rise of fast fashion brands from Forever 21 to Zara, and the competition from cheap and cheerful copycats such as American Eagle and Aerospatiale, served to slow Hollister's hitherto unstoppable ascent. As did the contention that its brash, bold, body-beautiful braggadocio was out of touch with chary, chastened, recessionary times. Its sudden stall and precipitous fall, however, commenced when an earlier series of untoward remarks by the chief executive surfaced on social media. His seeming disdain for "fat chicks" and the differently abled raised hackles in a society where inclusivity, virtue signalling and wide awokeness were becoming more widely embraced than before (Eggers 2015). A consumer boycott, brief though it was, spelled the beginning of the end for Jeffries, as well as the vainglorious retail brand he'd created and curated (Shah 2016).[3]

After shuttering some underperforming stores, newly appointed chief executive Fran Horowitz ordered a redesign and refit of the remainder, which commenced in 2015 and took three years to implement. The beach shack frontage has been removed; the interiors are lighter and less cluttered; the auditory and olfactory overload is no more; the clothing ranges are wider, as is their sizing and styling; the sales associates are now called "brand representatives" rather than "models"; the "Dudes" and "Bettys" doors into the gender-divided retail store have been removed, though the internal layout remains unchanged; and the legendary, look-at-me logo and lettering, once displayed ostentatiously on every item of apparel, has been toned down to something approaching subtle (Loeb 2017). Aided by a slick online operation, the seagull is slowly paddling its way back to profitability (Forbes 2019). Whether it will take flight and soar once more remains to be seen. The storms assailing the retail sector as a whole suggest otherwise (Economist 2020).

Introspection section

Just as the parents and guardians of Hollister-obsessed teenagers abhorred the object of their desire, so too introspection has been subject to scholarly disapproval (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). Yet despite the antipathy, it has taken off as a stand-alone research

[3] Jeffries' comments, clearly, were the straw that broke the seagull's back – though that's no excuse for them – because there were wider cultural, contextual, and competitive issues at play when Hollister fell from grace. Such macro-scale matters are beyond the scope of the present paper.

method (Gould 1995; Holbrook 1995; Sherry 1998). Also known as autoethnography, me-search and SPI (Brown and Patterson 2021), introspection has been burgeoning since the beginning of the millennium, not least on account of its close affinity to netnography in general and auto-netnography in particular (Kozinets 2020; Shankar 2000; Wohlfeil 2018). Increasingly embraced by adjacent academic disciplines including geography, sociology and gender studies, "autoethnographic introspection" (Holbrook 2017) is now an established tool of the consumer research trade (Hackley 2016, 2020; Patterson 2010; Villegas 2018).

Such indeed is the wealth of contemporary autoethnographic scholarship – more than 300 texts are listed on Amazon – many variations on the basic approach exist (Gould 2012). These range from "researcher introspection" (involving solo-authored reflections by the scholar undertaking the exercise) to large-scale consumer autoethnographies (where substantial numbers of informants' accounts are gathered and analysed en masse). The latter deliver a larger, richer, more varied data set – and thereby circumvents the "sample of one" shortcoming (Kozinets and Kedzior 2009) – but comes at the cost of conscripting consumer informants (Tissiers-Desbordes and Maclaran 2013). More often than not this means reliance on captive groups of students who are rewarded, as per laboratory-style studies of consumer psychology, with "course credit" (Brown 2004). Viewed positively, such consumer introspections combine the best of big numbers and broad insights. Regarded negatively, they are an unholy hybrid of irreconcilable traditions.

The present project is predicated on 92 introspections written by young people who not only grew up with the Hollister brand but comprised the brand's target market at the apex of its popularity when the beach shack bestrode the world. Although most of our informants are Irish, the group includes French, German, Indian and American nationals. Gender-wise, the essayists are fairly evenly divided between those who identify as male and female, and although their modal age is 19, a few are in their 30s and 40s. Their familiarity with Hollister varies as well. Nine informants had never darkened its doors – though they'd heard all about HCo on social media – and approximately one-fifth had been big-time brand fans back in the day. Quite a few work (or worked) in retail, including one or two for Hollister.

In keeping with multiple-introspection precedent (Patterson et al. 2008), the informants were tasked with visiting the store, then writing an introspective essay on their reactions to, and reflections on, the retail brand. The recommended approach, in accordance with Patterson, et al's (2008, 32) free-wheeling, anything-goes protocol, was entirely "open-ended." That is to say, they weren't given specific guidance beforehand, bar a few pointers on things to think about, such as store atmosphere, customer service, overall experience and previous visits, where relevant. They were, in addition, advised to follow the example of Morris Holbrook (1995), who urges exponents of introspection to be as creative, as lyrical, as imaginative as possible. And although the exercise was imposed upon participants, they were free to write what they liked about the focal brand, be it deeply critical, wildly enthusiastic or anything in between.

Informants' free-form reflective essays range from 2538 to 1315 words, with an overall average of 1882. This is the equivalent of some 750 pages of double-spaced text, which compares well with consumer narratives derived from depth interviews, etc. The introspections were thereafter analysed in accordance with the classic "close reading" principles of literary criticism, as pioneered by the doyenne of such approaches to consumer research, Barbara B. Stern (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2012; Hackley 2020; Holbrook 2009). That is to say, they were read, evaluated, reread and revaluated repeatedly until the data and the deliberators reached an accord and declared a truce, so to speak.

That said, lit-crit-inclined analyses of empirical data differ from interpretive research norms. The procedure is similar, insofar as it involves immersion in the data set: identifying themes, pondering possibilities, selecting excerpts and generally picking a path through the wilderness. There is one key contrast, however. Whereas most experiential research in the CCT tradition is predicated on the premise that ideas surge up from the oceanic depths of the data, like Neptune from the waves, literary criticism is impositional for the most part. It bears down from above, akin to

Zeus's thunderbolts from Olympus. It interrogates the data from a preordained angle. It looks for patterns, themes, constructs dictated by the particular approach adopted, be it Freudian, Feminist, Foucaldian or, as in this case, Allegorical. And while that smacks of hypothesis testing, it's more fluid in practice than it is in principle.

Figurative findings

Considered today, Stern's landmark studies of allegorical advertisements are curious creatures, strange hybrids like the Chimera of legend. In the first, she identifies two themes that typify medieval allegories and figure prominently in contemporary marcomms: personification and fear appeals (Stern 1988). The former is generally regarded as the quintessential feature of the genre. It is nothing less than "the most trustworthy signal of allegory" (Quilligan 1979, 42) and a commonplace of consumer culture (Aggarwal and McGill 2007). The latter theme reflects the essentially didactic character of allegories. They contain lessons, instructions, imperatives (Jameson 2019). Their aim is to edify, forewarn and, above all else, persuade.[4] The same is true of advertising's fear-inducing exhortations, even if it's only "buy this product or suffer the awful consequences" (Oakley 2014).

In her later article on earlier classical allegories, Stern (1990) once again identifies personification as allegory's core construct, albeit it's renamed "reification." She also highlights the importance of wordplay, the infinite flexibility and delicious ambiguity of language. Delicious in the sense that "the very labour of working things out is part of the pleasure" (Clifford 1974, 42). From Spencer's *Faerie Queen* onward, the genre has been characterised by playful punning – what literary critics call *paronomasia* – and all manner of "macaronic verbal mechanisms" (Quilligan 1979, 36). The same is true of marcomms, where painful puns are two a plenty (Redfern 2000).

Admirable as they are, Stern's articles don't cover every aspect of allegory and, of course, her comments are confined to advertising executions. And while this oversight is almost certainly a reflection of the recipient journals' space limitations, as well as the sagacious interventions of her reviewers, some scholarly specie has been left on the table.[5] Our empirical study not only finds riches in the remains but reinforces Stern's original insights. For the purposes of exposition, these can be summarised under the suitably literary alliterative headings: *Life*, *Location* and *Language*.

Life

Termed *prosopopoeia* by literary types, treating inanimate objects and intangible ideas as *living things* is the essence of allegories (Tambling 2010). Whether it be the squabbling Greek gods on Mount Olympus, the much-loved hares, tortoises, ants and grasshoppers of Aesop's fables, the Sir Simon Spendthrifts, Lady Lilith Lustworthys and Friar Fatbottom McGluttons of medieval morality tales, or the pathetic fallacies of Romantic Poets who rhapsodised about "dancing" daffodils, "smiling" sunbeams and "babbling" brooks, anthropomorphism is allegorists' steadfast companion. The same is true of today's businesspeople, with their cash cows, black swans and fail whales (Shah and Bailey 2020), to say nothing of brand managers' mascots, spokes-creatures and trade characters, such as Tony the Tiger, Elsie the Cow and Churchill the Bulldog (Phillips 1996). In a genre once defined as "didactic personification" (Honig 1959, 52), *prosopopoeia* is "a central component of allegorical procedures" (Copeland and Struck 2010, 6)

[4]Denzin (2013), analogously, emphasises that autoethnographies must have a moral purpose. As Hackley (2020, 170) puts it, "autoethnography liberates the critical voice and mobilises minority viewpoints, hence acting as an important corrective and antidote to prevailing scientific ideologies."

[5]We have no hard evidence but close reading suggests that a single original document had to be sliced and diced for publication purposes.

Personification of one kind or another is no less central to our informants' introspections. Like something out of a Stephen King novel, many remember Hollister as a malevolent place where palm trees attack, display tables trip them up, items of apparel are reluctant to be removed from their hangers or secrete themselves amid tottering piles of T-shirts and leggings, where they can't be found for love nor money. It's the domain of distressed display cabinets which look "like a wardrobe that just threw up its insides" (Shanice), interminable queues akin to "a monster snake moving at snail's pace" (Jill) and herds of captivated shoppers who are variously compared to "stampeding cattle," "headless chickens," "golden retrievers," "deer in headlights" and "moths drawn to the light," what little there is. It's a mallrat trap where beguiling ranges of clothing "lurk in the shadows" (Rachel), painful price tags "burn in my hand" (Hannah), ailing bank accounts "go to die" (Chelsea), chameleonic sweatpants "change colour on leaving the store" (Peter), hoodies grab hold of passers-by while muttering "buy me, buy me, buy me" (Rebecca) and a cannibalistic seagull bites "consumers' arms off for a sale" (Daniel). It's also a disturbing dwelling place of changing rooms whose walls close in on customers and whose doors open of their own accord, thereby exposing the semi-naked occupant, whose startled face is a picture-perfect personification of panic. Ellen still bears the psychic scars since her family continues to remind her of an unfortunate, bare-all "wardrobe malfunction." As does Chloe, who suffered at the hands of a psychotic puffer coat that wraps her in its coils and, akin to the creature in *Alien*, refuses to let go: "After struggling frustratedly for half an hour, I accepted the fact that it needed to be surgically removed." She ends up purchasing the parasite, which leaves her "crying inside at the thought of my bank statement."

Hollister's signature smell likewise has a life of its own, though it's the intensity rather than the aroma that makes its presence felt. It "sucks me into the store," Jill says. It "smacks me in the face," Tiarnan states. It "rips the skin off my body," Conan claims. It "knocks me out like Rocky Balboa," Matthew maintains. It "pursues customers all the way round the shopping centre," Patrick protests. It "calls out" to Tyler who is happily shopping in Superdry one level above in the mall. Yet five years on from HCo's full-force olfaction assault, the faintest traces of the brand's unforgettable scent are not only welcome, they are truly wonderful. They are "an old friend of my nostrils," says Rebecca, make Hannah "feel at home," carry Sophie back to her "happy teenage years," and ravish Barry on turning right at the store entrance where:

> The smell hit me. It was still alive! The smell of my 12-year-old bedroom. My wardrobe was filled with Hollister garments, the side-dresser overflowed with the So-Cal colognes. I mean how much did I want to be that shop in human form?

Even the darkness, Hollister's most singular signifier, is personified on occasion. In an echo of Victorian novelists' physiognomic belief that outer appearance reflects the person within – the face as the mirror of the soul – HCo's inky interior is indicative of its infernal nature. Some, such as Sophie, say it is a devil brand who places temptation in the paths of the unwary ("I know your tricks, Hollister!") or, like Ellen, consider it an evil demon that's possessing her ("Somebody call a priest because we need an exorcism, FAST!"). Others, most notably David, contend that the darkness is a diabolical device designed to disguise the satanic price tags and make unwary consumers dally ("it's scary, I could spend so much money right now"), since the longer they stay in-store, the more merchandise they buy (Underhill 2000).

Lucy, by contrast, believes it's a brand with a heart of gold, nothing less than a life-saver. Fashion model, Instagram influencer and secret shopper for a range of retail brands, including Hollister, Lucy tells a tale of terrible teenage years when her mother died young. She fell into the pit of despair and, in her grief, succumbed to self-harm and all sorts of eating disorders. Fortified by her father's credit cards, she then spent long hours in Hollister where she fed her fashion addiction and drew comfort from the gloom, which matched her mood, hid her from view and, in so doing, helped raise her spirits. "I like the darkness," she says in an Instagram post of April 2010, "I like it because it makes me feel invisible. The darkness allows me to be like me, the young bubbly teenager who had a passion for fashion." As far as Lucy is concerned, HCo saved her life. It brought her back

from the dead. It is *The Repair Shop* of the psyche, a retail store restorative, a fashion branding defibrillator.[6] More than that, she protests, it is a marketplace role model:

> For me, my overall experience was fantastic. The staff were all so welcoming and made me aware that they were available to help. They made me aware of what offers they had on and which products were the best value for money. I want to thank Hollister for employing males and females from all ethnicities and more importantly people who are different sizes. For me, this is incredible to instil into our teenagers today in a world where they are more self-conscious than ever. I hope those who are suffering from anorexia like I was in my youth, find the strength to reach out and help and not suffer in silence.

In addition to Lucy's "brand as therapist," there's "brand as paramour." Both Lauren and Jeriah write lovelorn letters to HCo, outlining the current state of their on–off relationships. Lauren's is a "please forgive me" epistle, expressing regret for abandoning the brand and attempting to patch things up: "I am sorry it took me so long to see the error of my ways." Jeriah's is a "Dear John" letter – a dear John Hollister letter – saying that, much as he loves the brand and will always treasure the happy times he'd spent in-store, their relationship has to end because they're not right for each other and must go their separate ways: "I wish you no ill, but it's best that we don't contact each other anymore. Goodbye Hollister, I'll remember what we were, but not what we could have been." Emily, on the other hand, doesn't spare the seabird's blushes:

> Do you know that feeling you get after you and a boyfriend break up, when you see them again and wonder how you could have possibly been attracted to them? Confused how you could ever have liked them at all? Yeah, that's the feeling I get now when I think about Hollister … All in all, I think it's safe to say that Hollister and I are through. We are, to quote Taylor Swift, "never ever ever getting back together."

Above and beyond the brush-offs are the obsequies. According to numerous informants, Hollister is a dead brand walking (Brown 2020). Dead in two senses: dead to them, insofar as they have no desire to sport the seagull again. They "wouldn't be seen dead" wearing it, frankly. Even Conor, a former fanboy, confesses that his dearly beloved Hollister is "dying out." On top of that, the store itself was devoid of life on the day or days they visited. There were no other customers to be seen on the premises, metaphorical bundles of tumbleweed were rolling across the shop-floor and, since the cash registers were refusing to ring, phantom bells tolled mournfully in the distance.

Not everyone, however, is attending Hollister's requiem mass. For many, the brand is neither dead nor on its last legs. It is getting older, though, largely on account of its changing customer profile. Quite a few informants note that the store contains many more "mature" (Lucy), "middle-aged" (Tom) and "elderly" (Rian) consumers than it did when they were younger and hungered for hoodies. For Rheia, this proves that the brand has become "old, sad and weary." For Alexandria, HCo is increasingly "tired and worn out." For Jill, it represents the retailer's less than successful attempt to evolve and develop in tandem with the Hollister Generation, the generation that was suckled by a seagull "until we were ready to fly the nest."

Living or dead, the brand is a human being of sorts and is regarded as such by our essayists.

Location

Allegories say one thing and mean another. But as the etymology of the word indicates, that saying is spatially situated. And spatially situated in the agora or marketplace (Tambling 2010). Indeed, the aforementioned gulf between allegory and allegoresis is related to matters geographical. Whereas allegory is a literary genre, allegoresis is an interpretive procedure. The latter is predicated on "levels of meaning," the long-standing idea that texts contain deeper meanings, higher aims, hidden

[6] *The Repair Shop* is a BBC TV series where family heirlooms and precious possessions are restored by a team of experts. When the reconditioned artefact is revealed to its owners, their looks of unalloyed and often lachrymose joy are living proof of objects' wonder-working power, their life-enhancing abilities (Farrington and Blades 2020).

agendas that can be discerned by clever close readers.[7] The former category, conversely, works horizontally rather than vertically. Allegories, Clifford (1974, 11) makes clear, typically "take the form of a journey, a quest or a pursuit." From Homer's legendary odyssey, via Dante's divine descent, past Pilgrim's painful progress, to Lyra's latter-day search for the Northern Lights, departures, destinations and the places in between appear incessantly. Numerous acknowledged classics of the genre – *Piers Ploughman*, *The Faerie Queen*, *Orlando Furioso* and so forth – unfold in sumptuously imagined secondary worlds, not unlike Lilliput, Narnia and Oz.

Be that as it may, locations loom large in informants' accounts of HCo. More than two-thirds of the essays take the form of quests, sallying forth to the store and, after doing battle with rival treasure seekers, belligerent bargain hunters, sharp-elbowed trendsetters etc., returning home with their haul.[8] Such errant adventures come in synoptic and supersized versions. The short form begins and ends in the immediate environs of the retail store itself, the long sort begin with leaving home, incorporate informants' peregrinations en route, and end on returning to the benison of student accommodation or parental haven.

Story structures aside, the contents of the accounts converge on one particular place, Southern California. Whatever else it does, the retail store transports consumers to the sun, sea, sand, surf, sensuality-suffused shores of So-Cal. HCo, for many, is a veritable heaven on earth, a practically perfect paradisal place, an Elysian environment that's a world away from the wet, windy, winter-is-coming country they come from. Ireland may be the Emerald Isle, but it's no Emerald City. So-Cal, by contrast, is an "inspired wonderland" (Chloe), "a fallen piece of heaven" (Oliver), a delightful dreamworld that young people love with an abiding passion because "they're the best places on earth" (Cormac). And who can blame them, especially when you've lived your life in a location where howling gales are a climatic constant and which served as a setting for *Game of Thrones*' storm-tossed Iron Islands (and the Kingdom of the North more generally)? "Suddenly," Katie recalls, "I wasn't in the harsh reality of an Irish winter, I was in a vintage beach shack off the So-Cal coast." Zara, similarly, "was no longer in cold, wet, miserable Belfast, I was transported to the warm California beachfront." Aodhan not only contends that the store is "beach shack portal to Southern California," but believes its big screen to be a "window" to Huntington Beach, broadly similar to the windows between multiple worlds in Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Stepping through, he says …

> … filled me with the same longing I felt as a child, with a deep desire to explore every inch of Southern California and to live this American experience. I had the deep desire to be surrounded by beautiful people on a beautiful beach under the perfect sun, in the perfect temperature. I had the deep desire to pick up a surfboard and dive straight into the deep end with no experience and ride the delicate frothing waves. I felt like I could do anything, like there were limitless possibilities. I felt invincible, in the prime of my life. I felt like I was in paradise.

Such perceptions, for the most part, are predicated on popular culture's representations of So-Cal: *Baywatch*, *The OC*, countless Hollywood movies, the sounds of the sixties and so on (Askegäard 2010). Although less than 10% of informants had actually been to California – and only one specifically visited Huntington Beach, itself an ersatz rendition of the original Surf City (Schau 2003) – they are smitten by the *idea* of Southern California and the languorous lifestyle it betokens. It's a milieu that Hollister sells with aplomb. And occasional consumer confusion. Several, David included, are discombobulated by the disconnect between their fun-in-the-sun beliefs about So-Cal and the shadowy, crepuscular, near enough nocturnal reality of the beach shack: "It should

[7]Classical convention contends that there are four levels of vertical meaning – literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogic – but lots of latter-day literary critics like Roland Barthes and Paul de Man identify many more than that. Walter Benjamin (1977) maintains, following the Torah, that there are 49 levels of meaning in *Trauerspeil*, German mourning plays of the seventeenth century (Shor 1982). Enough already!

[8]This narrative structure, *note bene*, was not imposed upon our essayists. It appears, rather, to be innate – not unlike Campbell's monomyth – or acquired, perhaps, through exposure to manifold movies, TV shows, computer games and novels where odysseys, expeditions and treks are two a penny.

be light-flooded, with bright furniture, a lot of beach items and acoustic-guitar-campfire-music." Katie, conversely, prefers to rationalise the arrangement, arguing that it evokes a "warm summer's evening at the end of a long, lovely, laid-back day on the beach." Dusk after all is a deliciously drowsy time of day, a time that "reeks of fornication and bad consciences" (Abell 2020, 35).

Equally incongruous, especially among first-time visitors to Hollister's Californian confection, is their evident spatial disconnect. Several surmise that the store is jungle themed (palm trees, elephant and peacock wallpaper, "ancient Aztec décor") or takes its cue from assorted other places besides So-Cal (Hawaiian islands, Southern Florida, Bondi Beach, "the tropics") or wonder why on earth in-store posters show sparkling snowscapes and smiling, sweater-swaddled models (California's ski in the morning, surf in the afternoon reputation hasn't registered, evidently). The store, almost everyone agrees, is paradisal but it is a pluri-paradise, not so much a heterotopia as a multitopia. Spatial ambiguity obtains on occasion.

Puzzlement, to be sure, is an important aspect of allegory's enduring appeal. It forces people, Stern (1990) stresses, to pay attention and work things out for themselves, which is part of the pleasure. And Hollister's evocation of a Californian beach shack is nothing of not pleasurable. For all that, the secondary worlds of consumer fantasies and the real worlds of retail stores are poles apart. Circumnavigation is problematic for many. Dark, crowded, noisy and noisome on occasion, with obstructions at every turn, Hollister can be a tortuous retail outlet. A torture chamber some say. In-store circulation is tricky at the best of times and almost impossible when it's busy. Although its basic layout is reasonably logical – male and female apparel on either side, palm tree-dotted store divider, circular circulation around a cash register island, discount merchandise mausoleum at the back – Hollister never less than bewildering. Alexandra's reaction is typical:

> I found the layout awkward and hard to navigate. There was no order to it at all. The big tables set out for the tops in the middle caused awkward encounters with other customers, especially when we were both squeezing through.

More than a few go further. Rachel is panicked by the "sheer pandemonium" of an "horrific excuse for a store." Niall blunders into every "Tom, Dick and Harry in the place" Dean and Chelsea suffer while people "push past me" or "walk over me" respectively. Quite a few lose their sense of direction and occasionally their shopping companions. A phone call is required to reconnect in a retail store where, Michael maintains, "my kid brother could come up with a better design, and he can't even read yet."

However, it's not all "horror, complete horror" (Zara). On the contrary, many informants revel in crazy mazy layout, adore the fact that there are treasures to be found if you search for them, and derive great pleasure from "hidden secret" parts of the servicescape, such as its discount items depository (Hannah et al. 2014). "Eventually," Danielle reveals, "I stumbled upon my favourite area of the shop. The reduced price section. It was tucked away at the back of the shop in what I can only assume was an attempt to hide it from customers. But they didn't fool me." As allegory traditionally "aligns itself with the hidden" (Tambling 2010, 71), such responses are entirely apt.

Equally pleasurable is the close proximity of other people, most of whom are prepossessing, to put it politely. The pulchritude of Hollister's employees is legendary. Close encounters with cuties are an important part of HCo's appeal, be they sales associates or other customers. It is something that's repeatedly reported, usually lasciviously. HCo's not so much an allegory of love (Lewis 1957), as a libido a-go-go love nest. And while more than a few feel out of place – "it left me feeling flabby, unfit and overdressed" (Alison) – many more feel right at home. And then some:

> Wearing that seagull made you feel sexier than taking your vitamins and working out. The shop was SO sexy my 13-year-old self would plan outfits to wear weeks in advance. I would backcomb my hair, put on a lick of lip gloss and a spritz or ten of "Crescent Bay" before swaggering into the shop, gawking at the guys' cheese-grating abs and seductive smirks that hung like juicy meat. Good luck trying to leave without blushing cheeks and trembling knees. (Kamile)

Love hurts, of course, as does the loss of the beach shack frontage. The renovated store, though, contains sufficient signifiers of its superCalifragilistic past to pass muster with many, most notably Mark, who is so taken by the So-Cal connotations that he's becoming "interested in surfing as a pastime." Hollister's online offer may be more convenient, and much easier to navigate, but it is a distant echo of the original. Around two-thirds of those who compared the formats preferred the real thing. "For the first time in my life," Ben confesses, "I would rather go shopping in the actual store than shop online." Bearing in mind that our informants are digital natives, weaned on the teat of e-tailing, this acknowledgement is incongruous, intriguing and implies that the "unstoppable Amazon" narrative is perhaps premature (Economist 2021).

There's a world of difference, though, between expressing opinions on a sofa and trudging through snow to an adorable store.

Language

After decades drumming up support for Marxism – and denouncing the depthlessness of postmodernism – the cultural critic Fredric Jameson (2019, p.iii) declares that "allegory is the fundamental mechanism" of literary endeavour. Although this assertion seems excessive, it's predicated on "literature's cleverest trick" (Sutherland 2010, 88). Namely, that allegories say one thing but mean something else. They are thus closely related to irony, satire and the pun. According to Quilligan (1979, 282), allegory's "closest generic resemblance is to the genre of comedy." Paraphrasing Freud's *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, she contends that it is a literary form predicated on "the high magic of low puns … the marketplace language of comedy" (Quilligan 1979, 42).[9]

Such claims accord with the pun- and parody-replete remarks of our informants, more than a dozen of whom refer to Hollister as "Hellister." Its notoriously inky interior is variously described as "a dungeon," "a catacomb," "a black hole," and "a dark hollow." Its logo is subject to a barrage of irreverent anthropomorphisms including "flying rodent," "flying demon," "albatross in flight" and "a wolf in seagull's clothing." Its drop-dead gorgeous employees are often unflatteringly compared to "clones," "replicants," "pod people," and "Barbie dolls." Damien, a self-described multi-linguist, likewise notes that the word seagull sounds rude in French (*c'est cul*, presumably) and, not to be outdone, Sophie observes that the name Hollister is a *langue d'oïl* (Old French) word meaning "whoremaster." Who knew?

Irreverent wordplay isn't confined to the cheeky comments of playful informants. The retail store is renowned for its risible phraseology, its pseudo So-Cal colloquialisms, the Hollister vernacular. Nothing if not distinctive, HCo's idiolect of Dudes and Bettys, Gnarly Waves, Wipeouts and Welcomes to the Pier is a world away from the "can I help you?" of archetypal retail discourse. A strange hybrid of surfer speak and American pop-culture colloquialisms ("plans for later?" "how're *you* doin?" "hey, what's up, babe?" "need any help there, dude?"), HCo's signature slanguage is the linguistic counterpart, so to speak, of its singular beach shack frontage. If brands, as Allen and Simmons (2012) suggest, should have a tone of voice, a way of speaking to the customer that is instantly recognisable, then Hollister's voice is the verbal equivalent of Emily Dickinson, Ernest Hemingway or Edgar Allan Poe. From its in-store signage ("Clothes Optional Beyond this Point"), through its inscribed mirrors ("You'll Look Better in the Club"), past its parade of taglines ("Seize the Denim," "Be the Best," "Surf's Up," "Live Like It's Summer"), to the names of its scents and sub-brands (Malaia, Crescent Bay, Pure Cali, Beacon's Beach, Gilly Hicks), HCo is a laid-back lexicon in board shorts and flip-flops. And as for the monumental, block-lettered HOLLISTER emblazoned on one side of its leggings and hoodies, it puts the TEXT into textiles.

[9]The power of the pun has not gone unnoticed in consumer culture scholarship. See, for example, Belk (2018), Minowa and Belk (2017). Stern (1998) and Thompson, Stern, and Arnould (1998), who dilate on Derrida's punderful philosophical pronouncements.

Language likewise brought about the brand's Icarian downfall. Although the former CEO's politically incorrect remarks were meant as a joke when made, they were interpreted very differently when recycled on social media many years later. In an increasingly inclusive yet intolerant epoch of cancel culture, Mike Jeffries' trash-talking tendencies came back to haunt him. His cruel comments, certainly, caused considerable consternation among consumers and resurface repeatedly in our dataset. Ditto the brand's brazen origin myth, which some informants deem a gross betrayal of customer trust:

> It was the first time I'd gone anywhere near a Hollister store since Mike Jeffries' public statement that he "hates fat chicks" and said "they don't belong in our clothes." So I was eager to find out how things have changed. I did a bit of digging through the piles of clothes and I was disappointed to discover that they have done the bare minimum. They only had five T-shirts in XXL. (Jamie)

> I wonder how the relationship between a brand and its consumers can be solid if it is based on a lie. I think there's a parallel with a love relationship: if one of the two people lied to start the relationship, one day it will be discovered and the relationship will be over. It is dead simple. (David)

Affront aside, numerous informants derive great pleasure from Hollister's preposterous patois. Calling its sales associates "models," peppering in-store interactions with surfer dude speak and, above all, uttering phoney phatic expressions in ridiculous American accents is manna from HCo heaven for humourists. If allegory is the literary kissing cousin of comedy, irony and satire, as Clifford (1974) indicates, then our essayists are inveterate allegorists. Rian, for instance, wryly remarks: "If I wanted to hear a fake American accent, I would watch Liam Neeson in *Darkman* the movie." Lauren makes a mock of the revamped retail outlet: "What's this? No massive crowd, no overwhelming smell, no palm trees getting caught in my hair. Where am I? What's happened? Why can I see? Who turned the lights on?' Am I at the right place?" Standing impatiently in line, Niall spews a satirical stream of consciousness:

> Why do they have a row of ten top-of-the-line, cutting-edge touch screen technology tills but only bloody one of them is ever in use? It's like they're taunting you, making you smoulder in that perfume filled cauldron to think about your deepest fears while useless models parading around topless laugh at you for buying an outrageously priced shirt.

Ironic "explanations" are also proffered for the stores infamously inky interiors (power cut, failure to pay the electricity bill, forcing shoppers to fondle and fall for its ruinously expensive merchandise) or relate to the much-recycled urban myth that what looks like a black T-shirt in-store turns out to be blue, green or puce in natural light (or, as Shay puts it, "you could buy a pair of shorts that turns out to be a hat"). Kamile likewise enjoys the delicious irony of discovering how her mother, who once spluttered with rage at the very thought of Hollister, now finds the clothing quite attractive and ends up buying into the brand: "The fancy armchair which used to be occupied by exhausted parents and yawning boyfriends? It is now occupied by me, as my mother continues strolling, rifling through the piles of camisoles, her eyes glistening. Oh how the tables have turned!"

That said, the brand's decision to abandon linguistic overkill, as part of its 2015–2018 revamp, fails to find favour with lexographically inclined informants. One or two feel that "who's next?" "cash or card?" "do you need a bag?" and suchlike are rather more authentic than HCo's studiously scripted So-Cal-ish interactions. But the vast majority of language lovers, Alison included, regret that the retailer's unique argot has been replaced by bog-standard brand blether:

> I see a young man browsing and he is approached by a male member of staff who proclaims, "Are you looking for anything in particular?" The exact same phrase uttered by the staff member who wanted to help me. I imagine the same phrases spoken in many time zones around the world every day, and right now I could be in any one of those stores.

That also said, it is only proper to acknowledge that, for many penurious consumers, such as Maeve and Matthew, time-worn words like "sale," "discount," "reduced to clear," "buy two get one free"

and so forth are not only very welcome but virtually irresistible. They unfailingly strike a Pavlovian chord with poverty-stricken, student loan-shackled informants.

There's more to Hollister than language, of course, and allegories aren't confined to the spoken or written word. As the history of art attests – be it Bruegel the Elder's *Fall of Icarus*, Cindy Sherman's *History Portraits* or Sarah Lucas's *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* – allegories can be visual as well as verbal (Battistini 2006: Hunter 2010; Sweedler 2020). Many literary allegories were first published as illustrated editions (*Alice in Wonderland*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *The Little Prince*) or have since attracted the attention of artists, movie makers, television producers and the like (*Watership Down*, *The Life of Pi*, *Lord of the Flies*). The hallmark of an exemplary allegory, Fletcher's (2012, 413) landmark text makes clear, is that "it is particularly visual in its meanings." It is surely no accident that Stern's seminal articles are predicated on a database of illustrated magazine advertisements, some of which are reproduced in her papers (see also Schroeder 2002; Scott 1994; Stern and Schroeder 1994).

It is equally entirely apt that two-thirds of informants' introspections include visual material. Most of these are reproductions of the Hollister logo, carrier bags, retail store exteriors and suchlike. Quite a few include the jokey jpegs – disoriented consumers armed with torches and gasmasks or wearing night-vision goggles – that circulated in the glory days of the brand. Several features photoshopped images of Mike Jeffries, whose uncanny similarity to Sloth from *The Goonies* is not only noted but considered wholly appropriate. A sizeable minority, what's more, incorporate old photographs of themselves and their schoolfriends dressed head-to-toe in HCo. These are often accompanied by tongue-in-cheek captions about the author's teenage tastelessness: "what was I thinking of?" For one or two, furthermore, the striking visual changes that formed part of the makeover – most notably reducing the size of the logo and abandoning the pictorial carrier bags – symbolise Hollister's diminished standing in the apparel branding pantheon.

However, as "allegories" and "symbols" are antithetical literary constructs (Tambling 2010), consideration of the latter can be saved for another occasion.

Way to go

Eminent author of feminist allegory *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Attwood maintains that fiction must matter (Sutherland 2011). Every novel should include a lesson, a message, a moral. This attitude is no less evident in the academic sphere, where our articles are expected to edify, to have a purpose, to make "managerial recommendations," to contribute to knowledge with "theoretical implications." Answering the "so what?" question is what it's all about.

So what can the CMC community take from the foregoing? Four things. The first pertains to our basic approach, studying the same brand from a range of contrasting lit-crit perspectives. Many years ago, Barbara Stern (1989) showed that the various schools of literary theory can shed a very different light on near-identical advertising treatments. Ditto Frederick Crews (1979) with *Winnie-the-Pooh*. But this approach, we feel, is losing traction among CCT-aligned consumer researchers, who increasingly look to assemblages, actor-networks, practice theories, etc. (Canniford and Badje 2015). And while there is much to be said for this shift in scholarship, literary theory of the Sternian sort is treading water. Our series of studies seeks to showcase its continuing relevance.

The second lesson relates to Hollister, our chosen empirical exemplar. According to MacQueen (1970), the best way to appreciate the power of allegories, which say one thing but mean another, is to assume that the stories they tell are ironic, parodic, satirical. Some of the most impactful allegories – *Piers Plowman*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Pale Fire* – are spoofs of a sort, as are the best-known instances in our own field, Belk's "Modest Proposal" and Holbrook's fabulous "Felology." Hollister's claim to fame, is not so much that it transfixed a generation, or soared high for a while then plunged into a sea of troubles. It's that the brand in its original incarnation was a parody of retail best practice, a "mallegory." Every golden rule of retail store design – brightly lit

interiors, dramatic display windows, ample circulation space, copious changing cubicles, fast-moving checkout facilities, anonymous yet attentive sales associates, a fascia board emblazoned with the name of the chain – was eschewed and inverted by the inventor of its shack attack, Mike Jeffries. HCo was a pun on the sun of southern California, a tongue-in-cheek take on theme retailing that appealed to many teenage mallrats. Unlike their discomfited parents, they "got it" and, like the best in-jokes, getting it conferred subcultural capital. "Holligory" became a retail store shibboleth, the marketplace counterpart of a masonic handshake.

The third takeaway involves the three elements of our allegorical analysis. Much has been written about anthropomorphism in recent years, not least by object-oriented ontologists (Harman 2018). For the most part, these studies focus on consumers' life-bestowing abilities – animating inanimate objects, products, brands, possessions. But the story of Lucy suggests that objects' life-giving abilities are no less noteworthy and, in its own small way, serves to reinforce prior "big picture" studies of marketplace magic (Arnould and Price 1993; Arnould, Cayla, and Dion 2017; Miles 2018). With regard to location, latter-day commentators concur that bricks-and-mortar retailing is in Icarian freefall (Economist 2020). Our digital-native informants, however, are inclined to agree that Hollister's in-store experience is not only better than the online alternative, but preferable. The rapidity with which consumers return to real-world retailing when lockdowns are lifted likewise bodes well for the future, though time – and future research – will tell. Linguistic aspects are also worthy of additional study. Retail brands typically express themselves in many manners of speaking besides verbal and visual. In Hollister, there are "languages" of lighting, of olfaction, of queuing, of sizing, of sales promotion, of product display, of carrier bags, and of background music and more besides. Although they are perhaps better described as dialects of HCo's discursive formation, such "brandiolects" offer endless opportunities for future retail store interpreters.

Our fourth point to ponder is no less linguistic, because it relates to the confusing double meaning of "allegory." The word, Copeland and Struck (2010) stress, is used in two main ways. It refers to the literary genre itself, classic works like Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. It's also an analytical procedure, an interpretive approach, where additional levels of meaning are sought in the focal work or works. Allegory, in short, is simultaneously a method of literary criticism and a type of narrative. Termed allegory's "vertical" and "horizontal" dimensions respectively, the former offers deeper insights, the latter better reading experiences.[10] Although both are evident in CCT's compendious corpus, it's fair to say that the easy reading of early interpretive articles – such as Stern's studies of allegory – is giving way to the perplexities of post-postmodern prognostication (Cantone, Cova, and Testa 2020). When reviewers insist on "deeper" insights, thereby emphasising the vertical over the horizontal, a price is paid in popular appeal, researchers' ability to reach out to wider readerships. More depth means less interest. Arguably.

The real issue, in sum, is whether our research should be read or respected. Both is the ideal, admittedly, but the divisive history of allegory indicates that one or the other tends to prevail. According to Clifford (1974), its attempt to ride two horses at once precipitated allegory's demotion to also-ran status behind "myth" and "symbol." Except at times of societal travail – of full-flux fluidity – when allegory picks up the pace and rides to the rescue. Times like the present. Perhaps.

Crash landing

Commenting on *Crash*, his celebrated allegory of consumer society, J. G. Ballard (1995, iii) observes that "We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – mass merchandising, advertising, politics

[10]The importance of this distinction cannot be overemphasised. Quilligan (1979, 28) puts it as follows: "the vertical conception of allegory and its emphasis upon disjunct 'levels' is absolutely wrong as a matter of practical fact. All reading proceeds linearly [and] allegory often institutionalises this fact by the journey and quest forms of plot … It would be more precise to say that allegory works horizontally rather than vertically."

conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel." *Crash*, he continues, is "an extreme metaphor for an extreme situation … a pandemic cataclysm that kills hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures millions" (Ballard 1995, iv–v).

Although Ballard was writing about cars not Covid, his allegorical storytelling is in tune with our tempestuous times. Part of a project to reinvigorate lit-crit approaches to consumer research, this paper has built on the pioneering work of Barbara B. Stern and responded to Kevin Keller and Price's (2020) latter-day call for more literary approaches to branding understanding. It has told the allegorical story of an allegorical retail brand whose sudden rise and rapid fall contains lessons for all. These lessons include the parts played by personification (*Life*), questing (*Location*) and phraseology (*Language*) in consumer behaviour. Much, though, remains to be said, allegorically or otherwise.

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